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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 001109

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR REINFORCES UNITY MESSAGE TO OPPOSITION

REF: A. MINSK 1102

[1](#)B. MINSK 1061

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) On October 11, Ambassador met with three senior leaders of the United Democratic Forces (UDF) opposition coalition: Belarusian Party of Communists leader Sergey Kalyakin, United Civic Party leader Anatoliy Lebedko, and Belarusian Popular Front Vintsuk Vyachorka. UDF leader Aleksandr Milinkevich was participating in an international conference in Prague and not able to attend the meeting. The leaders responded positively to Ambassador's call to work as a team, stressing that they were genuinely interested in working out their differences in time for the January 2007 local elections. They appealed to the U.S. and EU to ratchet up the pressure on the Lukashenko regime following an increase in politically motivated imprisonments. End summary.

Ambassador Meets Opposition Coalition Leaders

[1](#)2. (C) Following her October 9 courtesy call on Belarusian Foreign Minister Martynov (ref A), Ambassador convened her first meeting with the senior leadership of the United Democratic Forces (UDF) on October 11. Present at the meeting were Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) leader Sergey Kalyakin, United Civic Party (UCP) leader Anatoliy Lebedko, and Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) leader Vintsuk Vyachorka. UDF leader Aleksandr Milinkevich was not able to attend because he was participating in an international forum in Prague. After underscoring the United States' commitment to supporting the opposition's struggle for democratic change in Belarus, Ambassador asked the party leaders for their assessment of the coalition and the political situation in Belarus.

Lebedko Links Second Democratic Congress to Local Elections

[1](#)3. (C) Lebedko described two crises within the coalition: a crisis of ideas and a crisis of action. He attributed these crises to the coalition's structure, which was designed for presidential elections. Lebedko told Ambassador that the UCP presented a plan to the UDF Political Council for restructuring the coalition during a second opposition congress after the local elections. The plan would allow organizations that collect signatures for potential UDF candidates for the local elections to nominate delegates to the congress.

¶4. (C) Stressing that all coalition candidates and parties must communicate a single message, Lebedko also argued that the make up of the congress that would draft the opposition's national platform should reflect the performance of the parties and other organizations during the local election campaigns. He noted that only 25 percent of the Belarusian population actively supports democratization and civil society in Belarus and viewed the local elections as an important opportunity to interact with voters.

#### Lebedko and Kalyakin on the Same Page

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¶5. (C) Kalyakin was also receptive to a second congress for the same reasons. He strongly denounced suggestions by some coalition members to boycott the local elections and echoed Lebedko's comments regarding the importance of the local elections as a chance to deepen contact with voters.

¶6. (C) When asked by Pol/Econ Chief, Lebedko and Kalyakin denied press reports that disgruntled parties within the UDF formed a separate body to coordinate cooperation among opposition parties in the regions (ref B); Vyachorka, whose party is apparently against the separate coordinating body, remained noticeably quiet during this exchange. Lebedko noted such centralized oversight would not be possible in many regions due to a lack of opposition activists. Kalyakin cautioned Ambassador not to believe in the press and encouraged Emboffs to "talk to the source." Ambassador agreed that the press accounts are not always accurate but noted that Emboffs remain in regular contact with senior and working-level opposition party officials.

#### Vyachorka Hedges on Congress and BSDP

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¶7. (C) Vyachorka agreed that local elections are an opportunity to interact with voters and expand the coalition.

He supported the idea that the coalition should choose candidates on the basis of signatures collected but also insisted that the number of volunteers should be a factor. Vyachorka doubted whether Lukashenko would allow another Congress to convene in Belarus and asserted that the issues among the parties could be resolved without a congress. However, he agreed that the coalition must communicate one message and needs restructuring.

¶8. (C) When Ambassador asked the parties' leaders about their views on including former opposition candidate Aleksandr Kozulin's Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada" (BSDP) in the coalition, Lebedko noted that the UCP restructuring plan is designed to expand the coalition to include BSDP. He and Kalyakin noted strong BSDP interest in joining the coalition after the local elections and mentioned that BSDP representatives would attend a coalition meeting scheduled later that day. (Note: Press reports confirm that BSDP and coalition leaders, minus Milinkevich, met later on October 11 and agreed to coordinate their local election campaigns. End note.) Vyachorka, an opponent of including BSDP in the UDF, remained quiet.

#### Growing Dissatisfaction with Milinkevich?

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¶9. (C) Ambassador inquired about Milinkevich's views on these controversial issues in the coalition. Vyachorka and Lebedko were reluctant to offer their opinions. A frustrated Kalyakin related his recent conversations with Milinkevich in which he told the UDF leader that opposition activists were unwilling to work for the "image of Milinkevich." Kalyakin also noted that Milinkevich's positions on a second congress and other issues facing the coalition were not entirely clear.

¶10. (C) Vyachorka and Kalyakin noted an increase in the regime's political imprisonments, citing the recent arrests of Malady Front leaders Dmitry Dashkevich and Pavel Krasovski (septel). Vyachorka urged the international community to continue to focus attention on the political prisoners. He lauded the U.S. visa ban and requested that the United States press the EU to expand the visa lists. Vyachorka explained that expanding the EU list would have greater impact than the U.S. bans since targeted GOB officials most frequently travel to EU countries. Vyachorka added that the U.S. should encourage the EU to introduce a "positive visa policy" by not raising the cost of visas for Belarusians.

¶11. (C) Kalyakin asserted that one of the UDF's top priorities was to support victims of political repression and their families. Citing the recent repression against prominent Protestant churches as an example (septel), Kalyakin and Vyachorka stressed that the GOB was violating the U.N. Charter on Human Rights and requested the United States to highlight such violations. Kalyakin agreed with Vyachorka on the need for the EU to expand its visa ban but counseled the U.S. and EU against making threats that they cannot deliver. Kalyakin noted the EU's thus far unsuccessful efforts to remove GSP trade preferences for Belarus and advised the EU against making future threats that they cannot carry out because such actions damage the international community's credibility and further embolden the Lukashenko regime.

Russia

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¶12. (C) Vyachorka alone responded to Ambassador's inquiry into relations between Belarus and Russia. He claimed that the personal relationship between Putin and Lukashenko has not improved but the Kremlin was not interested in supporting democracy in Belarus. Vyachorka asserted that Russia could precipitate changes in Belarus just by raising gas prices.

Comment

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¶13. (C) Despite Milinkevich's absence from the meeting and the subtle discord between Lebedko and Vyachorka, the meeting was generally upbeat. When Ambassador commented that the coalition seemed stronger today than after the 2004

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parliamentary elections, all three leaders quickly agreed. Hopefully, the UDF leaders can resolve their differences in time to engage in a unified dialogue with Belarusian voters during the upcoming local campaigns.  
Stewart